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ABSTRACT

The lifelong process of career development poses special challenges for people with learning disabilities (LD). Literature on employment issues for adults with LD frames on-the-job problems in terms of individual deficits or recasts the issues as a function of the significant societal barriers faced by those who do not fit the norm. Research on high school and college students with LD shows a multifaceted career development program is needed. Many lacked clear understanding of their disability and its impact on career choices and ability to perform a job; many youth with LD had unrealistic or no career ambitions; and a large number were not actively engaged in career development and believed they had little control over career decision making. A model for career success of adults with LD is comprised of these seven factors: internal decisions (powerful desire to succeed, clear sense of goal orientation, reframing the LD experience) and external manifestations (persistence, goodness of fit, learned creativity, social network providing support). Practices to assist persons with LD gain and maintain employment are accurate self knowledge; world-of-work knowledge; self-efficacy enhancement; self-advocacy skills; job search skills; and development of personal qualities. Programs illustrating them are Pathways to Satisfaction; Fashion Institute of Technology career development support for students with LD; and Life Development Institute's SCANS-based transition-to-postsecondary program. (Contains 14 references.) (YLB)

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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF NO. 20

Learning Disabilities and Career Development

by Sandra Kerka
2002

The lifelong process of career development poses special challenges for people with learning disabilities (LD). Although the career development of individuals with disabilities is not widely discussed in the literature, key pieces of legislation enacted or reauthorized in the 1990s—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Rehabilitation Act (now Title IV of the Workforce Investment Act)—have helped increase the numbers of individuals with LD in postsecondary education and the awareness of their needs in the workplace (Hitchings and Retish 2000). This Brief reviews research on the career development needs of persons with LD and describes practices to assist them with the process of gaining and maintaining employment.

Employment Issues

Learning disabilities are generally defined as significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities (Michaels 1997; Ohler, Levinson, and Barker 1996). There are a number of types as well as major individual differences in severity, impact, and age of onset (Cummings, Maddux, and Casey 2000; Hitchings and Retish 2000). "There is no single story to tell about outcomes of students with disabilities" (Blackorby and Wagner 1997, p. 58). Many people with LD have succeeded in the workplace, often as entrepreneurs, and recent legislation is intended to ease the process of disclosing a disability and obtaining on-the-job accommodations (Brown and Gerber 1994). Adults with LD are employed at the same rate as those without disabilities, but many are underemployed—in part-time, entry-level, minimum-wage jobs (Blackorby and Wagner 1997). Like other workers, people with LD must cope with workplace changes such as teamwork, productivity and skill demands, and technological advances (Brown and Gerber 1994).

In some of the literature, on-the-job problems are framed in terms of individual deficits: persons with LD are said to encounter difficulties in establishing routines and processing information correctly (Ohler, Levinson, and Barker 1996); often exhibit low self-esteem and learned helplessness (ibid.); have impaired ability to assess strengths and weaknesses (ibid.); and lack career maturity and social awareness skills (Hitchings and Retish 2000).

Others recast employment issues as a function of the significant societal barriers faced by those who do not fit the norm, for example, biased attitudes, low expectations, or overprotectedness toward persons with disabilities (Michaels 1997). Although IDEA mandates Individualized Education Programs and Individualized Transition Plans, the latter often focus on academics, not career counseling or living skills; lack coordination among secondary, postsecondary, and community agencies; and are often developed too late in the educational process (Cummings et al. 2000).

Career Development Processes and LD

These employment issues underscore the need for a multifaceted career development program. Career development is a cyclical process that involves self-knowledge about personality, interests, skills, and abilities; understanding of the world of work and the requirements of specific occupations; and the ability to match one's abilities and skills satisfactorily with an occupation and a work environment. Other aspects that influence the process are occupational aspirations, self-efficacy expectations, and career maturity. A summary of research on high school and college students with LD shows the following:

- Many lacked clear understanding of their disability and its impact on career choices and ability to perform a job (Hitchings and Retish 2000).
- Restricted early opportunities, dependence on family, and experiences of academic failure may lead to low self-esteem and limited self-knowledge (Michaels 1997).
- Type and severity of disability, amount of time spent on remediation, parental overprotectiveness, and low expectations may limit opportunities for career exploration (Hitchings and Retish 2000).
- Adolescents with LD were more likely to limit their educational and occupational aspirations; aspirations for postsecondary education "did not necessarily translate into comparable occupational aspirations" (Rojewski 1996, p. 474).
- Many youth with LD had unrealistic career ambitions or no ambitions. Those with realistic ambitions seldom acquired the education or training that would prepare them for those jobs (Kortering and Braziel 2000).
- Not all who were eligible were involved in comprehensive transition planning in high school, sometimes because of the timing of onset or identification of their disability (Hitchings and Retish 2000).
- About one in three dropped out of high school, but those who took occupationally oriented courses were significantly less likely to drop out (Blackorby and Wagner 1997).
- A large number were not actively engaged in career development and believed they had little control over career decision making (ibid.).

Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities

Other studies have focused on adults with learning disabilities who have successful careers, identifying the factors that contributed to their success (Ginsberg, Gerber, and Reiff 1994; Reiff 1998). This research compared highly successful and moderately successful adults with LD, with success defined in terms of income level, job classification, educational level, prominence in field, and job satisfaction. The results were used to develop a model for the career success of people with disabilities. The overarching principle of the model is the degree to which individuals are able to take control of their lives:

> "Taking control" has particular import for people with LD. First, the experience of growing up with LD often leads to a loss of control...The autonomy of people with LD is undermined, especially as they find they have great difficulty with tasks that others take in stride...In the worst instances, people with LD may learn to be helpless. They feel that they do not control their own destinies; rather they are simply adrift. (Reiff 1998, p. 320)

Over time, successful adults made three internal decisions that helped them take control, and they transformed these decisions into four behaviors or external manifestations. These seven factors comprise the model:

Internal Decisions
1. A powerful desire to succeed
2. A clear sense of goal orientation
3. Reframing of the LD experience: accepting the disability, understanding their strengths/weaknesses, and taking action toward goals

External Manifestations
1. Persistence

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2. Goodness of fit—finding work that maximizes their strengths and minimizes weaknesses
3. Learned creativity—unique individual ways to accomplish tasks and compensatory strategies for weaknesses
4. A social network that provides support rather than encouraging dependence

Other essential factors include positive self-esteem, emotional intelligence, knowledge of one's civil rights regarding disability, awareness of accommodations, and skills for self-advocacy and disclosure. Several of these factors build upon the experience of disability and reinforce each other. For example, effective self-advocacy requires positive self-esteem. "Simply enduring in the face of the many obstacles that LD present may be a building block of emotional intelligence" (Reiff 1998, p. 323). These success factors and the career-related research cited in the previous section suggest practices that should be the focus of career development for persons with LD.

Career Development Practices

Michaels (1997) advocates an ideological shift from a focus on deficits to a belief in the gifts, capacities, and dreams of persons with disabilities, in other words, reframing of the LD experience on the part of professionals. The following practices can be implemented within this framework; many are the same practices that would be used with people without disabilities, but they are adjusted to the needs of the LD population: (1) *accurate self-knowledge* about skills, abilities, interests, and goals as well as knowledge of one's disability; (2) *world-of-work knowledge* acquired through career exploration, job shadowing, and appropriate work experience; (3) *self-efficacy enhancement* through attributional retraining, anxiety reduction, and reframing; (4) *self-advocacy skills*, including knowledge of civil rights, disclosure issues, accommodations, assistive technologies, and compensatory strategies; (5) *job-search skills*; and (6) *development of personal qualities* such as persistence, resilience, and the ability to build social support networks. Individualized Transition Plans should be developed as early as possible, be comprehensive, communicate high expectations, reflect the student's preferences, and be developed in cooperation with parents and social service agencies (Blackorby and Wagner 1997). Programs at various levels that illustrate these practices are briefly described next.

Recognizing that it is critical to develop self-efficacy and career awareness as early as possible, Duschene (1998) used multimedia and assistive technology (adapted keyboards, software for nonreaders) to help fifth-graders with LD identify career interests, prepare for job site visits, videotape interviews with workers, and combine this information with CD-ROM-based occupational information into a multimedia presentation. Positive academic, social, and career-related outcomes and engagement with technology resulted.

Pathways to Satisfaction is a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate transition program for 7th-12th graders (Grayson et al. 1997). Its five phases include (1) Focus—7th-8th graders and their parents work with a transition specialist to prepare for high school; (2) Synthesis—9th-10th graders gather information about postsecondary education and employment opportunities and undergo comprehensive vocational assessment; (3) Exploration—9th-11th graders engage in job shadowing, career fairs, workplace and college visits, and other exploratory activities; (4) Connection—11th-12th graders develop portfolios and make formal contacts with postschool institutions and organizations; and (5) Evaluation—follow-along activities by school staff track student progress after high school.

The Fashion Institute of Technology provided extensive career development support for students with LD (Ballard 1995). The project included inservice training for placement counselors and faculty; workshops on interviewing, resumes, cover letters, portfolio development, on-the-job adjustment (disclosure, accommodations); a computerized career guidance program for person-environment matching; and programs to raise employers' awareness of LD worker strengths, laws, and accommodations. The appendix to Ballard's report lists specific accommodations for various learning disabilities.

The Life Development Institute's SCANS-based transition-to-postsecondary program for out-of-school youth and adults includes the following (Crawford 1998): (1) LD-appropriate battery of aptitude tests, interest inventories, and skills tests; (2) an occupational awareness system that matches skills and abilities with job requirements; (3) job-related literacy skills enhancement; (4) individual needs assessment to help students learn more about their disability; (5) use of community resources, e.g., students arrange job shadowing tours, practice letter-writing and phone skills, survey employers about accommodations, etc.; (6) postsecondary placement/externship with tutoring and crisis intervention by institute staff; and (8) job placement. Crawford's report includes a learning matrix that documents skills attained using the SCANS framework.

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